

It's Not What You Said, It's the Way You Said It:

Slurs and Conventional Implicatures

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1 Introduction

Increasingly, philosophers of language are turning their attention to pejorative expressions as providing novel cases against which to measure theories of meaning and understanding, and with which to test accounts of the mechanisms operative in the use of language and the principles governing such use. In addition, philosophers working in metaethics are investigating the extent to which pejoratives provide a model by which to understand the meaning and use of ethical expressions. One might hope that, if theorists of any sort could achieve a better understanding of how pejorative language functions and its significance, they might have a better understanding of how to tackle and respond to the abuses of such language.

Pejorative expressions come in different varieties, including swear words (e.g., 'shit', 'fuck'), insults (e.g., 'dick', 'bastard') and slurs (e.g., 'faggot', 'nigger').¹ One should not assume that what one has to say about one variety will extend smoothly to another.

¹ I borrow this taxonomy from Hom 2010: 164. For some brief remarks on differences between slurs and swear words, see Whiting 2007: 192. See also Hay Forthcoming.

In this paper, I shall defend a certain account of *slurs*. According to it, there are two aspects to the meaning of a slur, namely, that which it contributes to what is said by the utterance of a sentence involving it, and that which is not part of what is said by the use of a slur but is otherwise conveyed, in a sense to be explained below, by the fact that one has used that particular expression with which to say it.

The account I favour takes off from the observation that slurs, like ‘faggot’ and ‘chink’, appear to have (or could have) neutral, non-pejorative counterparts with the same reference or extension, like ‘male homosexual’ and ‘Chinese’ (cf. Hornsby 2001: 128-129; Williamson 2010: 56). In view of this, the account maintains that slurs express the same semantic content when used as their neutral counterparts; that is, slurs and their neutral counterparts contribute the same thing to what is said by uses of sentences involving them. So, the same thing is said, in the relevant sense, by utterances of the following:

- (1) Sammy is a male homosexual.
- (2) Sammy is a faggot.

Of course, using (2) is derogatory in a way that using (1) is not. According to the account under consideration, the use of a slur *conventionally implicates* derogatory content, which is not implicated by the use of its neutral counterpart. The implicature is conventional, in Grice’s sense (1989: ch. 2), rather than conversational since one does not need to *calculate* the derogatory content expressed by the use of a sentence like (2) by appeal to the principles governing conversational exchange and the circumstances of utterance; indeed, it is unlikely that a hearer unaware that ‘faggot’ is a pejorative could calculate the derogatory content its use conveys. Moreover, the implicature is not typically *cancellable*—one cannot sincerely assert (2) and then unilaterally withdraw the derogatory aspect by adding, ‘but I have nothing against homosexuals’—but it is *detachable*—one can replace the slur with its neutral

counterpart, as in (1), and thereby avoid any derogation (cf. Williamson 2010: 57). This suggests that the implicature is generated, not by *what* is said in the relevant context, but by the *way* in which it is said.²

Williamson (2003; 2009; 2010) is a prominent proponent of the view of slurs just sketched, and I endorse it in Whiting 2008. But the appeal to conventional implicature needs to be treated with caution, if implicating is understood (as it usually is) as akin to implying, and if what is implicated is understood (as it usually is) as a claim of some sort. As Hornsby writes, when criticising a different view of slurs:

We may wonder whether there must be an articulable ideology in which every speaker who uses the [slur] is implicated [...] One can know that a word is commonly understood to convey hatred or contempt without being in a position to say at all exactly what commitments those who see fit to use it may incur (2001: 136-137).

Hom makes a similar point differently: ‘for any pejorative term, there does not appear to be an explicit, non-pejorative paraphrase that fully captures its pejorative force’ (2010: 166).

In light of this, it is more plausible to think of what the use of a slur conventionally implicates, in addition to that which is expressed by its neutral counterpart, as a non-cognitive attitude of contempt (or scorn or derision or...) for those to whom the neutral counterpart applies. This view, which I advance in Whiting 2007, is held by philosophers working in metaethics, such as Copp (2009).³ The view is also prominent in linguistics. McCready, for example, writes, ‘Pejoratives plainly introduce what I will call *mixed content*: they are predicative of at-issue content, yet introduce a conventional implicature’. He elaborates: ‘there are two parts to the

² The derogatory content meets another criterion for conventional implicature (Grice 1989: 39-40): it is *determinate*.

³ The view that the use of a slur expresses both descriptive content – the same content as one might express using its neutral counterpart – in addition to a negative non-cognitive attitude is widespread in metaethics (see Boisvert 2008; Hay Forthcoming; Schroeder 2009). However, not all those who hold this view also hold that the non-cognitive attitude is conveyed via conventional implicature.

meaning of a pejorative expression: an “ordinary” predication of an individual as part of some group, and a negative attitude expressed by the speaker with regard to that individual by virtue of being part of that group’ (2010: 2-4).⁴

McCready suggests that what the use of a slur conventionally expresses is an attitude which the speaker possesses. But it is hard to see how the mere existence of a convention could guarantee that the subject who employs a slur has the relevant attitude. Indeed, it seems possible for a subject to use a word like ‘nigger’ *and to derogate when doing so* even though she happens not to feel contempt toward those to whom the word applies (on an occasion or in general).⁵ For this reason, it is better to think of the use of a slur as *expressive of* the relevant attitude, not as *expressing* the negative attitude.⁶

For reasons mentioned above, it is debateable whether the conventional expression of derision is best described as *implicature* but, since such a usage is established, and since the relevant disclaimers are now in place, I shall follow suit.

Call the view that the difference between a slur and its neutral counterpart lies in what is conventionally implicated by its use, *CI*.⁷ Though I have suggested reasons for preferring a non-cognitivist account of what is implicated in the use a slur, I need not here resolve this dispute between proponents of *CI*, since my main aim is to defend the view against a number of objections which apply equally to cognitivist and non-cognitivist versions. Before turning to those objections, I shall briefly examine two of *CI*’s main competitors. According to the first, derogatory content belongs to

⁴ This view of slurs might qualify as a version of expressivism, as Hom characterises it (2010: §2.1).

⁵ Camp (this volume: §2) offers further reasons for doubting that the use of a slur expresses ‘an occurrent, negatively-charged attitude’.

⁶ This distinction is familiar in aesthetics (see Ridley 2003). When something expresses an attitude, it reveals and is explained by the state of the subject whose expression it is. When something is expressive of an attitude, it neither reveals nor is explained by the state of the subject whose expression it is.

⁷ For what it is worth, *CI* accords with standard dictionary definitions of slurs. According to the OED, for example, ‘nigger’ is a slang term referring to a dark-skinned person of sub-Saharan African descent and used as a hostile term of abuse or contempt.

what is said, not merely what is implicated, by the use of a slur. According to the second, the use of a slur is in no way expressive of derogatory content. I shall suggest reasons to reject both alternatives.

2 Combinatorial Externalism

Hom advances a sophisticated version of the view that the derogatory content of a slur is part of what is said or the (truth-conditional) semantic content expressed by uses of sentences involving it: *Combinatorial Externalism*, hereafter CE (see Hom 2008: 430-2). CE is *combinatorial*, since, according to it, the use of a slur expresses a combination of evaluative and descriptive concepts. CE is *externalist*, since, according to it, what is expressed in the use of a slur is in part determined by external factors, specifically, by the social institutions to which users of the slur are suitably related, institutions that involve ideologies and practices sustaining and sustained by them. For Hom, the use of a slur expresses a complex concept of the form, *ought to be subject to such-and-such discriminatory practices because of having such-and-such negative properties, all because of being such-and-such*, where what replaces each ‘such-and-such’ is fixed by the relevant external facts.

To make this more concrete, consider (following Hom’s example):

(3) Yao is a chink.

According to CE, due in part to the fact that the utterer of (3) is appropriately connected to racist institutions, the use of (3) expresses the proposition that Yao ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and, because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundering, and . . . , all because of being Chinese.

While I do not deny that external factors can play a part in determining what is expressed in the use of an expression,⁸ and while I am sympathetic to the idea that certain terms express so-called ‘thick’ evaluative concepts, I doubt that CE provides a promising account of slurs. Consider:

- (4) There will never be a chink Prime Minister.
- (5) There are no faggots living next door.
- (6) My daughter will not marry a nigger.

Plausibly, in uttering (4), one would perform a racist act. But, on Hom’s analysis, in uttering (4), one would express the same claim alluded to by:

- (7) There will never be a Prime Minister who ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and, because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundering, and . . . , all because of being Chinese.

Not only is what (7) expresses true, it is not racist; indeed, it seems to express admirably non-racist sentiments. If one extends Hom’s analysis to ‘faggot’ and ‘nigger’, use of (5) and (6) will similarly turn out not to be derogatory.

The point here is that it is typically no less derogatory to make *negative* claims using slurs than it is to make *positive* claims using them, while CE suggests otherwise.⁹

Consider next the following exchange:

- A₁ The US President is a nigger.
- B₁ A said that the US President is a nigger.

Intuitively, B’s utterance is expressive of racism. As Hom himself observes (2010: 168-169), slurs derogate even when embedded in reports of what another person has

⁸ Indeed, it seems plausible that what attitude is conventionally implicated by the use of a slur, as per CI, is determined by the kinds of socio-historical factors Hom mentions.

⁹ It is widely acknowledged that slurs convey derogatory content under negation and within the scope of conditionals (see McCready 2010).

said. This is not unexpected if, as per CI, the derogatory content is not part of what is said by the use of a slur but results from the way in which it is said, that is, the choice of words. In contrast, CE does not seem able to explain why B's speech act is derogatory. On Hom's view, B's report is straightforwardly true and non-racist.

In his most recent work, Hom acknowledges these problems and hints at, though does not develop in detail, responses to them (2012: §5). First, he suggests that, while (given CE) what is said by uttering, say, (5) is true and non-pejorative, derogatory content is *conversationally implicated* on such an occasion. However, this does not look promising for the cases that concern us. As noted above, conversational implicatures are *cancellable* but, as Williamson remarks in a different context (2010: 57), if one were to use a sentence like (5) and add, 'though I've got nothing against homosexuals', one would only compound bigotry with hypocrisy. Moreover, one *calculates* a conversational implicature by appeal to what is said, the circumstances in which it is said, and the principles governing communication. However, as noted above, one does not need to calculate the derogatory content (5)'s use is expressive of, and it is doubtful that one could.

Alternatively, Hom (2012: §5) suggests that, in our judgements concerning what is expressed by slurs when embedded in speech reports, under negation and so on, we might be confusing 'derogation' with 'offence', where derogation is what one does with the slur, namely, derogate those to whom its neutral counterpart applies, while offence is the subject's response caused by the use of a slur, namely, that of being offended. So, on this view, in uttering (5) one does not derogate—one (only) offends.

For the cases that concern us, this view is highly implausible. Suppose one utters (6) to an audience of racists. No one takes offence but one has surely performed an act of derogation (to which, one might add, offence *should* be taken).

3 Prohibitionism

According to CE, derogatory content figures in what one says in using a sentence involving a slur; according to CI, it belongs to what one conventionally implicates. *Prohibitionism*, which Anderson and Lepore advance (Forthcoming; this volume), rejects the assumption common to both, namely, that we need to understand the use of a slur as expressive of derogatory content.

According to Anderson and Lepore (this volume: §3), ‘slurs are prohibited words and it is the violations of those prohibitions that cause offense’. On this view, it is not because of what one’s use of a slur is expressive of that one derogates; rather, it is because one uses a word which (for certain reasons) is taboo.

This ‘simple and straightforward’ account, as Anderson and Lepore stress, promises to explain why slurs are offensive even when embedded in speech reports or under negation. However, Prohibitionism seems false for a simple and straightforward reason: it is possible for there to be slurs in the absence of taboo or prohibition. Imagine a deeply racist society in which the use of ‘nigger’ is not prohibited but nonetheless is expressive of racist thoughts or attitudes concerning those to whom its neutral counterpart applies. Members of the society derogate in using ‘nigger’, even though they do not violate any prohibition. The word, as used in that society, is surely a slur.

Of course, *we* might treat that word as prohibited or taboo. But that could only explain why the word is a slur in *our* socio-linguistic community, not why it is a slur in *their* community. Moreover, were we not to treat the word in this way, the word would remain a slur. And, were the racist society to become enlightened, its members might look back in shame at their past employment of the now-prohibited slur—it

would surely be a mistake to think that the word was not a slur until the prohibition came into force.

4 Objections to CI

Perhaps there are ways for the proponents of CE or Prohibitionism to respond to the above criticisms. Instead of exploring them, I shall assess the objections to their rival, CI.¹⁰ If those criticisms are unsuccessful, the search for solutions to the above problems lacks motivation.¹¹

4.1 NDNA uses

According to CI, the implicature generated by the use of a slur is not cancellable though it is detachable. On this view, Hom states, ‘Derogation ought to occur in every context of use for epithets without any means for cancellation. However, [...] there

¹⁰ Hom (2008: 424) argues that CI’s proponent owes an account of the variation in the derogatory force of slurs. For example, ‘faggot’ is more inflammatory than ‘limey’, though less inflammatory than ‘nigger’. But this is a problem of detail, not principle. CI is a general account of slurs and, in accounting for what is conventionally implicated by the use of a particular slur, one might appeal to the socio-historical circumstances surrounding its use, the kinds of attitudes associated with those who use it, and so forth (cf. n7 above).

Hom (2010) and Hom and May (Forthcoming: §8.3) also appeal to considerations concerning the uses of insults and swear words in objecting to views like CI, which I shall ignore, since I seek only to defend CI as an account of slurs.

¹¹ Anderson and Lepore (Forthcoming: §7) suggest that CI cannot explain why slurs are offensive in contexts in which their content is ‘inert’. Consider: “‘Nigger” means *nigger*’. The word ‘nigger’ as it occurs on the right-hand side of this meaning-attribution is not straightforwardly *used*, any more than ‘nothing’ is used as it occurs in: “‘Rien” means *nothing*’ (Rundle 2001: 114). As it is not used, ‘nigger’ is not expressive of content (derogatory or otherwise). Nonetheless, its use is offensive.

Since I do not know what the correct analysis of meaning-attributions is, I am not in a position to resolve this issue here. For now, I shall only point in the direction of a response. While the expression which occurs on the right-hand side of meaning-attributions like those above is not used, it is not merely *mentioned* either. ‘We can’, as Lepore and Anderson note, ‘substitute synonyms inside meaning attributions’. So, the meaning-giving expression is neither used nor mentioned; rather, it is ‘exhibited’—to use Sellars’ helpful term (1997 [1956]: §30)—in such a way as to convey the meaning of the mentioned expression on the left-hand side. If the expression exhibited is a slur, then presumably its exhibition conveys derogatory content. The fact that the content of the slur is not *wholly* inert might suffice to deal with the issue Anderson and Lepore raise.

Anderson and Lepore also claim that the mere *mention* of a slur can be offensive (Forthcoming: §7). If true, it is hard to see how CI could explain this.

While I do not doubt that the mere mention of a slur can *cause* offence, I doubt that merely to mention a slur is really to derogate. Witness the readiness of philosophers, linguists and those compiling dictionaries to mention such expressions! Moreover, to the extent that mentioning a slur does cause offence, there is no reason why a proponent of CI could not appeal to the fact, which Anderson and Lepore highlight, that its use is taboo.

are meaningful, felicitous uses of epithets that are non-derogatory' (2008: 424). Hom is clear that he does not have in mind *appropriated* uses, where members of the group targeted by the use of a slur self-consciously employ it so as to undo its derogatory force. Rather, he claims, there are non-derogatory, non-appropriated (NDNA) uses, which typically occur in pedagogical contexts (2008: 429). Consider:

(8) I am Chinese, not a chink.

CI, according to Hom, cannot explain why, when uttering this sentence, an act of derogation does not take place.

In a similar fashion, Anderson and Lepore (Forthcoming: §6) ask, with respect to what they call 'didactic' uses of slurs, 'How can we explain why not every occurrence of a slur slurs? After all, if its offense is part of its meaning, how can its non-slurring uses exist?'¹²

In response, the first thing to point out is that it is far from obvious that (8) is felicitously formulated. If 'chink' is being genuinely and straightforwardly *used*, it is doubtful that it is not derogatory in force, or any less derogatory than it is when it appears in (3) above. The only reason Hom offers for thinking that, as it occurs in (8), 'chink' lacks derogatory force is that it is not being *applied*. As he says, 'Derogation is the actual application, or predication, of' a slur (2008: 432). However, attention to sentences such as (4-6) remind us that, contra Hom, whether or not the use of an expression is expressive of derogatory content is not determined by whether or not it is being applied; there are contexts in which slurs are not applied but which are expressive of racist or bigoted attitudes. So, Hom's claim that slurs can be straightforwardly used, as in (8), without being expressive of derogatory content is contentious.

¹² Anderson and Lepore also ask this question with respect to 'appropriated' uses of slurs (Forthcoming: §9; this volume: §5). I suggest that, when so used, the expressions bear a different meaning than they would otherwise bear, at least insofar as (once appropriated) they no longer conventionally implicate the relevant negative attitude. For some brief remarks on this issue, see Whiting 2007: 202.

For the cases Hom has in mind, in which slurs are put to pedagogical use, it would be more appropriate to formulate the relevant sentences using scare quotes, as follows:

(9) I am Chinese, not a ^schink^s.

Scare quotes are a way of using an expression to express a concept while, as Brandom puts it, ‘disavowing responsibility for the propriety of using the expression’ to do so (1994: 545).¹³ So, scare quotes serve in part to distance oneself from, not *what* is expressed, but *how* it is expressed. This, of course, lends itself nicely to CI, according to which the derogatory content implicated in the use of a slur results, not from *what* is said, but from *how* it is said. To return to the case at hand, in scare-quoting ‘chink’ in (9), the utterer is distancing herself from the racist attitudes the use of such a term is expressive of.

To see that this is not simply an ad hoc attempt to fix a broken theory of slurs, note that this account of scare quotes captures what is going on in cases involving expressions other than slurs whose use typically generates conventional implicatures. Consider:

(10) Even Bernard passed the test.

Suppose, as many hold, that an utterance of (10) literally expresses the same semantic content as:

(11) Bernard passed the test.

Suppose further that, due to the presence of ‘even’, uttering (10) conventionally implicates that Bernard’s passing the test was somehow unlikely. Now imagine that Sharon believes that Bernard passed the test, but does not accept the implicature. She might utter:

¹³ In speech, one might secure this effect as follows:

(9*) I am Chinese, not a so-called chink.

Note that I am following Brandom’s convention of using ‘s’s in superscript as scare quotes.

(12) Yes: ^sEven^s Bernard passed the test.

In uttering (12), Sharon is expressing agreement with what was said in the utterance of (10), while disowning the conventional implicature by registering that she does not endorse the way in which the original sentence is formulated.

This offers a different way, consistent with CI, to understand NDNA uses. According to it, using a sentence like (9) conventionally implicates derogatory content, though the way in which (9) is formulated allows the speaker to keep that content at arm's length and so prevents an act of genuine derogation taking place.

Unfortunately, this leads to a further concern. If CI is correct, scare quotes notwithstanding, utterances of (9), or for that matter (8), semantically expresses the same content as:

(13) I am Chinese, not Chinese.

While (9) might be offered as an important corrective to the use of racist language, (13) expresses a straightforward contradiction.

I think that the proponent of CI should acknowledge that what is said by the use of (9) is the same as what is said by the use of (13). However, she can add that, in a given context, it is clear what the utterer seeks to convey, that is, what she *con conversationally implicates*, namely:

(14) I am to be referred to as 'Chinese', not as 'a chink'.

The reason behind this is, very roughly, that the subject does not want to be viewed in the way those who use 'chink' view Chinese people, or to be subjected to the derogatory attitudes its use implicates.

Note that cases like this are very familiar. Consider the following sentence, not involving a slur, which I have found myself uttering in conversation with my infant son:¹⁴

(15) I am your daddy, not your father.

What is said or semantically expressed by the utterance of (15) is a contradiction. Nonetheless, in a given context, it is clear enough what is conversationally implicated, namely that which is expressed by:

(16) I am to be referred to as ‘daddy’, not as ‘father’.

The reason behind this is that, even though ‘daddy’ and ‘father’ express the same concepts, ‘daddy’, unlike ‘father’, conveys (arguably, as a matter of convention) feelings of intimacy, affection and dependence.

So, the sort of story a proponent of CI might tell with respect to what NDNA uses of slurs are expressive of is, not only coherent, but one which one would want to tell with respect to analogous uses of non-pejorative expressions. NDNA uses, then, do not pose a serious challenge to CI.

4.2 Partners in crime

Hom argues that CI has ‘the unintuitive result that certain racist claims are trivially true’ (2008: 424). Consider:

(17) Chinese are chinks.

According to Hom, what (17) expresses ‘is not only literally true according to [CI], but analytically and, thus, necessarily true’ (2008: 424). Richard makes a similar point. If one accepts that what is said when a racist uses (17) is true, ‘This certainly

¹⁴ A line from the song, ‘Negative Equity’ (1997), by Carter the Unstoppable Sex Machine, provides another example: ‘You don’t watch movies, you watch films’.

seems to make us complicit in the racist's racist attitude, and thus to some extent racists ourselves' (2008: 13).

The proponent of CI is certainly committed to thinking that what is said by an utterance of (17) is true, since it expresses the very same content as an utterance of:

(18) Chinese are Chinese.

The task for the proponent of CI is to show that this is not an objectionable consequence of her view, in part by accounting for our reluctance to acknowledge it.

One reason it is 'unintuitive' to think that (17) expresses a truth and for being reluctant to acknowledge that it does is that, typically, saying that a sentence expresses a truth is, among other things, a roundabout way of endorsing the use of that sentence. Indeed, it is a platitude that truth makes for correct assertion, so to say that one expresses a truth in uttering a sentence assertorically is, in effect, to say that what one does is correct, i.e. that one is not doing as one should not in uttering that sentence.

If that is right, CI can explain why one would be reluctant to acknowledge that an utterance of (17) expresses a truth (even if one is a proponent of CI). To say that (17) is true is uncomfortably close to endorsing its use, to judging that one is not doing as one should not in uttering it. If CI is right, it is no surprise that one would be loath to say this, since the act of uttering (17) is (as a matter of convention) expressive of racist attitudes.

So, CI can certainly account for the feeling that to acknowledge the truth of what (17) expresses is to be complicit in the act of derogation its utterance commits. Of course, according to CI, it is *not* strictly-speaking wrong to say of (17) that it expresses a truth, even an analytic or necessary truth; in saying this, one is only endorsing *what* is said, not *how* it is said, one is only judging that one is not doing as one should not in asserting *what* one does, rather than in asserting it in the *way* one

does. Moreover, according to CI, it is not racist to say of (17) that it expresses a truth, since what is said in an utterance of (17) is not racist, only what is conventionally implicated by the use of a slur to say it. To say all of this is evidently *not* to say that, if CI is correct, there are no grounds for objecting to an utterance of (17); on the contrary, if CI is correct, such an utterance *is* objectionable since it constitutes an act of derogation.

In light of this, it is tendentious for Hom to say that, if CI is true, ‘certain racist claims are trivially true’; it is precisely the view of CI’s proponent that what is claimed in uttering (17), and so what is true, is not racist, though, of course, claiming it by uttering (17) is. The force of Hom’s criticism seems to trade on an act/object or -ing/-ed ambiguity.

The proponent of CI can in this way show that it is not an objectionable consequence of her view that the same thing is said by uses of (17) and (18). Nonetheless, (17) and (18) clearly differ in their *cognitive significance*. In view of this, with Hom and May (Forthcoming: §8.4), one might ask whether the proponent of CI can *explain* this difference.

Fortunately, the explanation here is straightforward. Two sentences differ in cognitive significance just in case it is possible for a rational subject to understand both sentences while taking different attitudes toward them (cf. Evans 1982: 19). Since (17) involves a slur while (18) does not, and (so) since (17) is expressive of racist attitudes while (18) is not, it is no surprise that a rational subject who understands both might take different attitudes toward them.

4.3 IQ tests

Recall that a conventional implicature is detachable. So, if uttering a sentence involving a slur like ‘faggot’ conventionally implicates certain bigoted attitudes or

ideas, it should be possible to detach that implicature by using a sentence involving a different expression, for example ‘male homosexual’, while saying the same thing.

Hom aims to show that, contra CI, the derogatory content is in fact part of what is said and not part of what is conventionally implicated by the manner in which it is said. To do so, he appeals to Bach’s IQ test (see Bach 1999):

An expression contributes to what is said in the utterance of a sentence involving it if and only if there can be an accurate and complete indirect quotation of the utterance (in the same language) which includes that element.

In light of this, Hom asks us to consider examples like the following:

A₂ Yao is a chink.

B₂ A said that Yao is Chinese.

If CI is correct, this should be an accurate and complete speech report. However, according to Hom, ‘B has misreported what A has said. B’s report is incomplete, so the derogatory content is not detachable (as conventional implicatures are supposed to be) but in fact part of what is said’ (2008: 425).

A proponent of CI is indeed committed to holding that B’s report is complete and true *as a report of what A said*. But thinking about how such exchange might continue shows that this is not as strange a view as it might first appear. One can easily imagine B continuing as follows:

B₂ A said that Yao is Chinese, though, being a foul-mouthed racist, A didn’t quite put it like that.

That it would make sense for B’s report to continue in this way provides support for the view that the derogatory content belongs, not to what is said, but to how it is said.

It is instructive also to consider cases, which Hom does not, in which it is a bigot making the speech report, for example:

A₃ Male homosexuals live next door.

B₃ A said that faggots live next door.

Of course, what B says is objectionable, but it is not clear that this is because A did *not* say what B reports her as saying, because the report is *false*. Think about it from B's perspective (repugnant as it is).¹⁵ It is plausible to think that, by B's lights, this would be an accurate report, irrespective of A's attitude toward homosexuality. Indeed, B would use the same sentence when reporting what A said whether A is bigoted or not. This all makes sense only if, as B uses 'faggot', its use semantically expresses the concept *male homosexual*, and any derogatory content is not part of what is said but is otherwise conveyed. Moreover, it is safe to assume that we (non-bigoted speakers) understand the term in the same way as bigots. As Williamson says, in a different context, 'We find racist and xenophobic abuse offensive because we understand it, not because we fail to do so' (2003: 257). Hence, not only can CI accommodate indirect speech reports, but attention to certain reports actually supports the view.¹⁶

4.4 A modal-conceivability argument

Hom and May (Forthcoming: §8.2) object to views like CI by appeal to the following argument:

- (i) It's conceivable for there to be Jews without kikes.
- (ii) Whatever is conceivable is possible.
- (iii) Therefore it's possible for there to be Jews without kikes.

The conclusion of this argument is clearly inconsistent with CI, since, according to CI, the terms 'Jew' and 'Kike' are co-extensive.

¹⁵ As Camp stresses, 'In developing a theory we need to cover their full range of uses: in particular, not only as weapons of verbal abuse, but also in relaxed conversation with bigots. We should not let the outrage that slurs produce in many hearers, including ourselves, blind us either to what bigots take themselves to be doing in using them, or to how their fellow bigots might receive them' (this volume).

¹⁶ For a similar line of thought, developed independently and in a different context, see Schroeder 2009: 304-305.

One might reject (ii) by denying that conceivability entails possibility. I shall not pursue this, since the proponent of CI must reject (i). Given CI, what one says in advancing the first premise is just what would one say were one to advance:

(i*) It's conceivable for there to be Jews without Jews.

Evidently, this is inconsistent.

Hom and May argue that this makes matters worse for the proponent of CI. If the premises are inconsistent, the conclusion necessarily follows!

I fail to see the problem here. If CI is correct, then the modal-conceivability argument is valid. But this commits the proponent of CI to accepting its conclusion only if she is committed to its premises. Since the first premise (by the lights of CI) is inconsistent, the proponent of CI is not committed to it and should reject it.

This leaves the proponent of CI the task of explaining away the apparent plausibility of (i), of accounting for why it might seem to us that the relevant state of affairs is genuinely conceivable. One can certainly conceive of a world in which Jews are not subject to derogation through the use of slurs, a world in which 'kike' is not used, or at least not used with its current meaning. It is the conceivability of this situation, I venture, which lies behind the intuitiveness of the first premise.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I challenged CE, according to which what is objectionable about the use of a slur is what is said by utterances of sentences involving it, and Prohibitionism, according to which what is objectionable about the use of a slur is that it violates taboo. I then defended CI, according to which what is said by the use of a slur is what is said by the use of its neutral counterpart, while what is derogatory about the use of a slur is the claim or, as I prefer, attitude conventionally implicated by it. When it

comes to slurs, I conclude, the slurring is done, not by *what* we say, but by the *way* we say it.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Thanks to Guy Fletcher for very helpful comments on this paper.

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